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Ethnicity and the EUB/Methodist Union

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The proposal that ethnic differences between predominantly German EUB's and predominantly English Methodists might be a factor in the decline of the United Methodist Church seems initially preposterous. After all, EUB's and Methodists had a highly similar polity, common roots in the second great awakening, and virtually identical doctrinal confessions. And ethnic differences are a thing of the European past.

But recent sociological research has suggested that the American dream of the "melting pot" is more wish than reality. Differences rooted in ethnic origins remain a tremendously vital force in the communities of the "new world." As Andrew Greeley, has written of future historians,

They will find it especially astonishing in light of the fact that ethnic differences, even in the second half of the 20th Century, proved far more important than differences in philosophy or economic system. Men who would not die for a premise or a dogma would more or less cheerfully die for a difference rooted in ethnic origins. (Greeley, 1969, p. 5)

Ethnic differences are particularly powerful when wedded with religious values. For the last two quadrennia, the United Methodist Church has recognized the importance of ethnicity in the emphasis on the ethnic minority local church. Yet the differences between European ethnic groups are presumed to be a relic of the past.

Nevertheless, ethnic identities are remarkably persistent many generations after immigration to the United States. An ethnic group is generally defined as "those who conceive of themselves as alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others." (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965, p. 3) The sense of commonality engendered by these common origins shapes our thinking, our feelings, and our behavior in relation to our most basic activities; eating, working, and celebrating. Thus, the definition of "we" and "they" is frequently connected with ethnicity. However, these basic shared values are often outside our conscious awareness and become cultural filters that shape our relationships. In fact, attitudes about ethnicity like sex and death often touch the deepest unconscious feelings of persons.

A frequent response to ethnicity is to leave it alone, since dragging it out into the open may heighten the problem. But if the conflict is creating major problems, it may be that recognizing and discussing this may surface new possible responses.

This possibility became clear to me one day this fall. Carolyn Bohler, who teaches pastoral care and counseling at United, invited me, the NT prof, to share a

class with her. On this particular day, the topic was ethnicity and pastoral counseling and we read an article by Monica McGoldrick, "Ethnicity and Family Therapy." In the discussion of the different attitudes of ethnic groups toward counseling, I observed that the most significant ethnic difference in both the seminary and the United Methodist Church was largely unrecognized, namely, the differences between the ethnic Germans of the EUB tradition and the ethnic English of the Methodist tradition. As we discussed these differences, the class positively lit up with signs of recognition and of appreciation. One woman, who is jointly serving a two-point charge of a former EUB and a former Methodist parish with her husband, reported that the churches have been trying to merge for more than ten years. They have simply been unable to do it and can't understand why. This was the first time she had any way of understanding what was happening.

The merger of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist churches in 1969 was a hopeful and natural union. Both groups had historic connections to the second great awakening. The history of the movements indicates that they were closely related and took separate paths largely because of differences in language. In view of the virtually total disappearance of German in the EUB churches, there were no substantive reasons to remain apart. The doctrinal and administrative differences between the two churches were worked out with relative ease. The expectation would be that both communions would benefit from the joining of their resources.

The fact is that, for whatever reason, the new United Methodist Church has been in decline since the union. Many reasons have been advanced for this: the lack of evangelism, the decline of ministries to youth and young adults, and the general malaise of the "main-line" Protestant churches. But the decline has been most severe in the conferences where the EUB churches were the strongest. Statistics are, as far as I know, unavailable to compare what is happening in former EUB and former Methodist churches. But, in general, while the administrative dimensions of the merger have apparently gone well, some of the things that have been happening are not good.

The general consensus among all those with whom I have spoken about the merger is that the EUB tradition has been largely lost. The term most used by both insiders and outsiders is "swallowed up." This is, of course, more a description of a feeling than an objective fact. The relative sizes of the two churches made this feeling inevitable to some degree. Yet the impact of the objective realities of the merger has been heightened by the attitudes of the two groups that may have their roots in ethnic differences. And, when examined from the perspective of ethnicity, German ethnics are the largest ethnic minority group in the United Methodist Church.

That is, it may be that the ethnic Germans have stopped speaking German but the ethnic traditions have continued largely without being recognized, even by the EUB's, some of whom were not German in their ethnic origin themselves. Furthermore, ethnic English and ethnic Germans look alike and compared to the other ethnic minority groups of the church are not even recognized as separate

groups. Yet the contemporary situation in both Eastern Europe and in the European economic and political community are ample evidence that the historic differences between the major ethnic groups of Europe are by no means past. Perhaps, a deeper understanding of our differences can help to clarify what is happening to us.

Instead of describing the characteristics of the EUB tradition in either doctrinal or administrative terms, it is best for this purpose to describe one of its most basic characteristics.

A major commitment in this tradition is to humility. This humility has its roots in several teachings in the Bible: "For everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted." (Luke 14:11; Matthew 23:12) "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3) This characteristic of the EUB tradition had its roots in German pietism. As was the case with the ethnic origins of these sayings in the community of Israel, the admonition to humility was an antidote for ethnic pride. Thus, the emphasis in German pietism on humility was a Christian response to the fierce pride that has been a characteristic attitude of the German people.

EUB's are fiercely humble. This is evident in many ways. There is a commitment to self-effacement, to doing everything to avoid exalting oneself. The notion of singing one's own praises or of promoting one's individual cause is virtually unthinkable. Humility is the opposite of pride, arrogance or pretentiousness. It is sometimes associated with self-deprecation and a feeling of weakness or lack of worth. But, at its best, humility in the EUB tradition was a genuine virtue that generated authentic meekness, the sober assessment of one's gifts, and modesty.

Of course, the celebration of a particular virtue within a group creates distinctive patterns of behavior. Thus, politics in the EUB tradition was conducted within a very strict set of protocols. It was necessary to campaign by always appearing to be not campaigning but only responding to the will of the community. Generally it was best for others to speak on one's behalf. The fierceness of this humility is, of course, that this humility is a response to and sometimes a mask for deep ethnic pride. The bottom line was that such displays of humility were the only way to win. If anyone openly exalted themselves, they were thereby disqualified from office.

Of course, everyone understood the rules of the game. As long as there were only others who shared the same values in the mix, everything was fine. Those who humbled themselves were honored and since everyone in the group both understood and played by the same rules, the system worked. Counting others as better than yourselves is fine as long as everyone else is doing the same.

However, all of this changes when outsiders who don't understand the rules enter the game. They are likely to misperceive what is happening. These outsiders, the radical German pious Amish still call them "English," may think that this elaborate ritual of humility is in fact a sign of inferiority. They may become impatient with this

highly nuanced dance of self-effacement and simply rush in, assert themselves, and take control. Nothing could be more insulting or insensitive to the pious spirit. From the perspective of German pietism, those who misperceive and act in such a manner are confirmed as inferior, arrogant, and unchristian. The mute protest emerges: "But don't you understand? We didn't mean that we were inferior. We were simply trying to be Christian. 'f This is particularly galling for Germans when such offenses are committed by persons of English ethnicity who have their own struggles with a spirit of triumphalism and an ethnic pride masked by a different kind of reserve.

The difficulty for the pious spirit is then to determine how to fight. For a pious EUB, open fighting is out of the question. But the perceived lack of sensitivity and mutual commitment also creates great tension and hostility, particularly when ethnic differences are implicitly involved. All conflict is then submerged and worked out indirectly. The humiliation and anger involved may be extreme but it is to be dealt with in a spirit of resignation. As a result, the effect on the German ethnic spirit is one of passive aggression. It is a combination of withdrawal from conflict and deep anger and hostility, which manifests itself in indirect actions of undermining the system.

Thus, one of the major problems that I perceive in the merger has been the unrecognized conflict between ethnic styles that has been implicit in this mix of German and English piety. Methodists have frequently misperceived this commitment to humility among EUB's as a sign of inferiority. In fact, it has been a mask for a German pride that implicitly assumes that it is the English who are inferior. This has in turn meant that EUB's have frequently perceived Methodists to be triumphalist in spirit and hungry for power. In fact, Methodists have simply been operating according to a different set of ethnic rules and pursuing a commitment to the pursuit of Christian perfection in a different manner.

Nevertheless, in a myriad number of interactions, these ethnic differences have resulted in misunderstanding and hostility toward others and, therefore, toward the Church. Instead of building up the Church, these conflicts tear it down and undermine the possibility of constructive relationship.

Thus, a good thing happened in Carolyn Bohler's class. Some light began to shine on an underlying problem in our communal life. It seemed to this author, who is only in the process of discovering his German ethnic origins, best to offer this confession in all humility to the church. But, if it also happened that some of my English brothers and sisters, whom I deeply love and honor as at least as good as myself, might recognize themselves in this scenario, all the better for our communal body.